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## A working we will go: professional women over 60 and still working

What comes to mind when you hear the word “retirement”? Depending on the person, it can have many different meanings. People who are just entering the workforce often look at it as a process that they can disregard or postpone, so they put it on the “back burner” with little thought. However, for persons nearing the age of retirement, the meaning is often much the opposite. Those who addressed and planned for retirement early are typically ready and looking forward to it, whereas those who did not are frequently backpedaling, trying to make up for lost time. Then there are those whose only option is retirement, whether planned or not.

Elizabeth F. Fidler, author of *Women still at work: Professionals Over Sixty and On the Job*, found herself in the latter situation. While working in a full-time job, she was unexpectedly forced to retire when funding ended for a research project on which she had been working (and after spending a considerable amount of time job searching and doing some consulting work). However, Fidler, a successful and longtime writer and researcher and having published other books such as *Learning the Ropes: Urban Teacher Induction Programs and Practices in the United States* (a book to assist new teachers in urban schools) and *A Parents' Primer: What You Need to Know about Your Child's Elementary School*, was quite adamant that she was not ready to retire. Her situation led her to find out if other women were experiencing similar job issues.

One idiomatic phrase that she uses quite often throughout the book is having been put “on the shelf”—a phrase that she also describes as similar to “put out to pasture, eased off into the sunset, written off.” Putting it more precisely, she defines it as “how a reluctantly unemployed [person] . . . feels when unemployment has terminated and job prospects are slim in a down economy, despite (or perhaps because of) an advanced degree.” Other people have also heard it described it as being “overqualified,” particularly from potential employers in their response to a job application.

In writing *Women still at work*, Fidler states that her goal was to discover why women 60 and over are still working. First, she started her investigation by sending a survey to all women she knew over 60, asking them to send the survey also to other women they knew over 60. The main criterion that Fidler required of the women was that they had to be still working, if only part time. A total of 155 women completed the survey, and Fidler interviewed 34 of these women. One concern that she points out in her introduction is that a number this low may not represent all socioeconomic statuses of women, particularly those of lower economic status, or minorities. Consequently, most of the women Fidler interviewed are wealthy.

Next, Fidler dives into extensive research, leaving “no stone unturned,” including the latest findings from organizations such as the Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS); U.S. Census Bureau; AARP; Sloan Center on Aging and Work; and from several well-known authors. The book is a profusion of statistics on working women and men and much of it comes from the BLS. So it should be considered not only accurate but also unbiased.

In discussing the downturn of the economy and its affect on people's ability to retire, Fidler quoted several interesting facts, such as, “By 2030, a 65-year-old American female can expect to live another 19.2 years on average (16.3 years on average for males),” “By the year 2018 . . . participation of seniors

65 and older in the labor force is projected to grow nearly 10 times faster than the total labor force,” and “By 2030, the number of Americans over 65 will more than double . . . .” She also covers points on age and wage discrimination, deferred retirement, baby boomers, meanings of different age groups (older, oldest old, etc.), unemployment, and so on. Fidler discusses just about every topic you can imagine about the labor force and provides sources.

In her research of the interview profiles, Fidler strives to determine why the women still worked, their feelings about their work, and when (or if) they plan to retire. Other areas Fidler discussed during the interview were age, health status, education level, family, role models, life philosophy, work status, job motivation, and general life challenges. The statistics of the women are impressive. The ages of the women surveyed are from 60 to 84, and about one-fourth are 70 and over, with two thirds in good health. Ninety percent have at least a bachelor’s degree; all work in either healthcare, business, education, or social work or services; and over half work full-time jobs and don’t intend to retire anytime soon.

Overall, the women were quite positive about their jobs and lives and openly discussed their past and present ambitions, giving credit to parents, spouses, or teachers. Almost all of them (about 80 percent) work because they enjoy the people they service and enjoy contributing to society. The women’s philosophies on life and working were quite inspiring, too. Some words of wisdom that they shared included “age is just a number”; “stay healthy and intellectually active”; “do what you love to do”; “the number does not mean anything”; “choose your life—do not let it just happen to you”; “keep moving—keep involved”; and “only do what you enjoy, keep learning, and try new things.”

I wonder as well if Fidler’s findings may be questioned because wealthy women are disproportionately represented. Another study with a higher population cohort would need to be conducted to represent a more diverse group of women. However, I have to give her kudos for pointing out this deficiency upfront with her readers. Interestingly, despite their wealth, 57 percent of the women in the survey work because they *need* the income. Some of this is due to falling investments, but it’s mainly due to the needs of their adult children (137 of the 155 had children) who were hit hard by the recession, and the women have taken on their “burdens.” This is an example in which socioeconomic status has no boundaries when it comes to mothers and their children.

Fidler’s narrative is not the dry, ridged prose of a scientific article. It is, instead, lively, hopeful, and even emotional—she is speaking directly to women, particularly to us older women, sparking our confidence and encouraging us through the eyes of others. She states, “I sincerely hope this book uncovers some valuable insights for my peers as well as the enormous cohort of 77 million baby boomers following hard on our heels and the smaller cohort behind them.”

Her in-depth portrayals of the 34 women are thorough and enlightening. Each woman’s character is an open book, revealed through her thoughts, ambitions, challenges, and love of life. As a woman nearing the “older” generation and of a moderate socioeconomic status, because of reading this book, I feel quite inspired to rethink what “retirement” means to me and I would heartily recommend it to others in a similar situation. For those of a different socioeconomic background, however, the book may not be so inspirational.

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**ABOUT THE REVIEWER**

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